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ABSTRACT

This digest presents an overview of successful urban anti-truancy strategies, including both supports and penalties for students and their families. It is generally believed that to prevent truancy a sustained, multifaceted, and personalized program for each student must be developed. Community collaboration is essential to these efforts, as the example of the Well Community Council in Pittsburgh (Kansas) illustrates. Alienation from school is a major reason why students become truant, and tracking practices that marginalize poor and minority students are a primary cause of alienation. Organizing schools to promote attendance through supportive personalized attention can do much to prevent truancy. Truancy prevention programs can be designed to increase students' attachment to school and help them overcome personal and family impediments to school attendance. Parents also need a variety of supports, beginning with notification if their children are not in school. Parent counseling and parent workshops can help, providing information about the consequences of truancy and ways to prevent it. School, state, and community policies should make it clear to students and their families that the community has zero tolerance for truancy. States can hold parents responsible for their children's attendance in a variety of ways, even linking eligibility for certain public assistance programs to school attendance. The reasons students stay away from school are diverse, and many remedies are needed to address the problem. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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URBAN POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO REDUCE TRUANCY

Thousands of youth skip school each day in urban areas. Frequently, truancy is the first sign that a student is in trouble—personally, at home, and at school. Leading to a youth's dropping out of school altogether, truancy sabotages opportunities for future employment success. It is also a major catalyst for drug use and daytime crime and violence (*Manual*, 1996). Since the reasons youth stay away from school are diverse, the methods used by schools and communities to motivate their return range from school reorganization and intensive family counseling to legal and economic sanctions for families. This digest presents an overview of successful urban anti-truancy strategies, including both supports and penalties for students and their families.

Community Collaborations

It is generally believed that to prevent truancy a sustained, multi-faceted, and personalized program for each student must be developed. For example, an effective anti-truancy program in Pittsburgh, Kansas—the Well Community Council—involves schools, business and religious leaders, social service workers, and judges. The Council, recognizing that truancy runs in families, works to help families change both their attitudes and behavior. The involved agencies provide intensive services, ranging from educational remediation and enrichment for students to long-term family counseling. With the goal of maximizing effectiveness and ensuring the ongoing commitment of collaborators, the Council has identified and announced the different role that each agency is to play in working with families; the ways the agencies are expected to communicate with each other; and the sequence of interventions to be used, escalating in severity from initial meetings with parents to court hearings (Sheverbush & Sadowski,1994) .

Another way to involve the community in truancy prevention efforts is to engage the existing natural support system. In many urban areas, particularly those characterized by a single ethnicity, a network of individuals and organizations, which developed organically, watches out for the welfare of neighbors and provides various kinds of support. The network, particularly members who are highly respected, may be more successful in working with truants and their families than outside agencies, which may be unfamiliar with the community's culture and concerns. If the network cannot work on truancy prevention itself, members can work with those agencies to encourage families to accept help (Acosta & Hamel, 1995).

School Organization to Promote Attendance

Alienation from school is a major reason why students become truant, and tracking practices that traditionally marginalize poor and minority students are a primary cause of alienation. To promote both the attendance and achievement of all students, a Baltimore high school, for example, reorganized itself into a career-focused academy, and provided teachers with training to improve their ability to work with challenging students. To increase student engagement, the curriculum was made more relevant, and instruction was provided in 90-minute periods, using cooperative learning and project-based activities. Low-performing students received extra supports, and disruptive students were taught in a twilight program where they can be educated without disturbing other learners (McPartland, Legters, Jordan, & McDill, 1996).

In general, schools with low truancy do not experience disruption or violence. Their teachers arrive on time, have low absentee rates, and are committed to remaining at the school. They give frequent praise, interact with the entire class, and use open-ended questions. They minimize corporal punishment, verbal reprimands, and competition (Rohrman, 1993). To encourage student attachment to the school, teachers, and classmates, and to promote personalized attention from teachers, some schools keep classes together for several grades (Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996).

Student Programs

Truancy prevention programs aim to increase students' attachment to school and help them overcome personal and family impediments to school attendance. To promote academic achievement and decrease students' discomfort in classes, schools provide educational supports, including tutoring and English language instruction. To motivate students, schools help them develop academic and life goals. Some schools assign teacher or student mentors to work closely with truants to encourage their attendance, help them solve problems, provide them with a sense of belonging and security in what may otherwise be perceived as an alienating environment, and even accompany them to school. Truants are also actively recruited for extracurricular activities, another way of increasing their engagement (Rohrman, 1993).

The school and community often work together to provide students with other supports for school attendance, such as health care, prenatal and child care, transportation vouchers, clothing, access to washing machines, and a quiet place to do homework (Haslinger et al., 1996). Finally, because the skills that help youth resist engaging in other types of negative behavior also inoculate them against a desire to skip school, special programs teach youth impulse control, problem solving, and conflict resolution; and help them develop self-awareness and self-esteem (Sheverbush & Sadowski, 1994).

Parent Programs

Most parents appreciate the need for children to attend school, but some are unaware that their children are truant, do not know how to increase their attendance, or may believe that meeting family needs is a satisfactory reason for absence. Some immigrant parents may not understand that attendance is compulsory. Therefore, parents need a variety of supports (*At-Risk Youth*, 1992; Rohrman, 1993; Sheverbush & Sadowski, 1994; Haslinger et al., 1996):

First, schools need to inform parents of their children's schedule and, as quickly as possible, of their absences. Some schools have an automated phone system to report student absences to parents. School personnel, in a non-confrontational and respectful way, should personally contact parents of truants, visiting their home if necessary, to work with them to

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overcome problems that cause absenteeism. For example, schools can offer to provide wake-up calls (one school even gives away alarm clocks).

In some school districts an attendance officer contacts parents because staff efforts have proven ineffective. Officers offer case management services to families, or initiate involvement with the juvenile or family courts.

The focus of parent counseling now takes the perspective that truancy is not a *child problem*, and that it requires a *family solution* to facilitate family system changes. This helps prevent a sibling from becoming truant when another truant in the family returns to school. In particular, families are helped to cope with a child's adolescence, because truancy can result from an inability to accomplish positive transitions in relationships. Finally, counseling fosters the development of supportive modes of coping with family stresses and of appropriate family power relationships.

Parent workshops can provide information about the following: the consequences of truancy (for students, educationally and legally, and for families, who may be held legally liable and suffer economic sanctions); ways to communicate realistic expectations about school achievement and respect for school and educators; signs of children's disengagement from school; alternative schools or special programs for their children; part-time job opportunities for youth that do not interfere with school attendance; and strategies for getting children to school. Other valuable information for parents includes locally available child care, public assistance, and other social service options (that free older children from having to skip school to meet family obligations). Schools and community groups can also organize support groups for parents of troublesome children so they can share problems and strategies for solving them. Finally, involving families in adult basic education is a way to benefit them materially while also helping them develop a commitment to education.

School, State, and Community Policies

Policies should make it clear to students and their families that the community has zero tolerance for truancy. They should clearly state that attendance is the responsibility of students and their parents, and that all will be held accountable for absences. Policies should be educational, not punitive, should include due process provisions, and should be flexible enough to deal with extenuating circumstances (*At-Risk Youth*, 1992). While many communities offer the intensive supports described above, serious sanctions against truants and their families are also being imposed around the country.

Student Policies

Some schools mandate course failure, suspension, or transfer to special programs after a certain number of unexcused absences (Rohrman, 1993). Some states refuse to grant a driver's license to a truant. Some states and cities have curfews during school hours that allow law enforcement officers to question youth to determine whether they should be in school, and report truants to the school. In Oklahoma City, officers bring youth to a community-run detention center for assessment, and return them to relatives, who are subsequently notified by a district attorney of the consequences (fines, eventual arrest) for repeated truancy. Truants brought before a judge in some areas can be mandated to attend counseling sessions or a specially-designed education program (*Manual*, 1996). In New Haven, Connecticut, middle school absentees must appear in truancy court, where a panel of high school students questions them, helps them overcome impediments to attendance, and provides mentors for support. While some educators believe that truancy can best be prevented by positive measures, there is some evidence suggesting that "no method has been as effective as taking truants to court" (Wilson, 1993, p.43).

In Ohio, the Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program (LEAP) ties the amount of welfare grants to pregnant and parenting students to school attendance, while also providing support services. The goal is to encourage graduation from high school, which significantly increases the lifetime earnings capabilities of young parents. A multi-year evaluation of LEAP indicates mixed results: overall, school attendance increased and a significant number of adolescents initially in school continued to attend, received diplomas or GED certificates, and went off welfare because they secured employment; however, many young parents who returned after a prolonged absence were repeatedly truant and sanctioned financially, and failed to graduate (Bos & Fellerath, 1997).

Family Policies

States can hold parents responsible for their children's truancy in a variety of ways. They can mandate attendance in the above-described parenting education programs. Several states also link eligibility for certain public assistance to children's school attendance in programs known as Learnfare. Proponents argue that cutting the benefits of truants' families increases attendance, while opponents argue that innocent family members suffer as a result of either the parents' failure to take young children to school or an adolescent's failure to respond to parents' admonitions (Hartocollis, 1997).

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